THE LIQUID TRADITION BECOMES FROZEN

In some traditions, if you were a singer, you were in part a composer. When you sang a song, you sang it *your* way: as best you remembered it, but also through the filter of your own style, background, personality, and physiognomy. No two versions of a folk song were exactly alike; nor were they supposed to be.

More recently, people have become accustomed to learning a song either from a particular recording or from sheet music. One version thereby has become canonized, sanctified, and protected from change. The performer has become a zealous servant of that one version of the song, afraid to change anything, afraid to be a partner in its creation.

Improvisation is an important aspect of the oral tradition. The greatest interpreters of folk songs and "popular standards" are renowned for their ability to sing in such a way that the listener can feel the expressive power of the lyrics in each and every phrase. These singers become partners with the composer—altering the rhythm, the dynamics, even the pitches, to enhance their involvement in the song. The details of their unique personalized performances cannot be captured in notation—the nuances are far too subtle, and no two performances are exactly alike.

Likewise the advanced *ba'al keri'ah*, after having mastered the basic patterns, feels a personal involvement with the text, using the *te'amim* as a means of making the biblical lyrics come alive for the listener.

ONE TRADITION AMONG MANY

We don't know what the original melodies were for the *te'amim*.[3] But we are reasonably sure that throughout the years of the Diaspora these original melodies evolved and mutated as they were passed on orally from one singer to the next. Inevitably, the chanting of the *te'amim* became tinted by the alien colors of non-Jewish music. Eventually the cantillation motifs sung by German Jews began to sound different from those sung by Syrian Jews. Furthermore, even within the community, each *individual* brought something of himself to the *te'amim*. No two Jews chanted the Bible in exactly the same way.

More recently, many Jews have learned *te'amim* by listening to tapes or reading notated sheet music. In both cases, the effect is the creation of a unified tradition, but a tradition that has become impersonalized.

The beginning of the twenty-first century finds heterogeneous Jewish communities in all parts of the globe. A single synagogue may be home to Jews who came (or whose parents or grandparents came) from Germany, Lithuania, Yemen, and Salonika. Within a generation or so, the members of this synagogue will have all adopted a single tradition. Which one will they choose? Likewise, men and women who turn to Judaism for the first time as adults have the opportunity to choose a tradition that was not theirs from birth. Which one will they choose?

---

[3] Several attempts have been made to reconstruct the original melodies. See Haïk-Vantoura, *The Music of the Bible Revealed*, and Weil, *The Masoretic Chant of the Bible*.